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ABSTRACT

To examine the ways in which participation in the Iowa Writing Project influenced secondary English language arts teachers, a study surveyed and interviewed teachers who participated in the 1982 and 1985 Iowa Writing Project about their beliefs and practices concerning writing instruction. In addition, case studies and over 70 hours of classroom observation were used to examine the relationship between these teachers' practices and beliefs when they attempted to change their approach to the teaching of writing. Preliminary results indicated that all teachers reported changes--often dramatic changes--in their beliefs about writing and the teaching of writing. Former assumptions, based on viewing writing as a product to be evaluated, were replaced by beliefs in writing as a process. However, as teachers tried to implement those beliefs some dissonance occurred. Teachers identified several factors which they perceived as impediments to teaching as they believe--curricular restraints; a lack of support services; too little room; outsider expectations that grammar instruction results in good writing; schools and communities that value standardized test scores; personal fears; and an awareness that their students may encounter future high school and college instructors who will expect certain skills and forms to have been mastered. Although teachers' beliefs changed after participation in the writing workshop, changes in writing instruction practices were more ambiguous. (Two pages of teacher comments are attached.) (MM)

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WRITING PROJECTS AND WRITING INSTRUCTION:
A STUDY OF TEACHER CHANGE

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WRITING PROJECTS AND WRITING INSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF TEACHER CHANGE

Since 1973 the Bay Area Writing Project has spawned the National Writing Project with more than one hundred affiliated sites around the U.S. and abroad. At the same time, other agencies have established their own independent writing projects. Most draw from the same recent research and theoretical base (Vygotsky, 1962; Emig, 1971; Britton, 1970; Britton et al, 1975; Graves, 1983; Moffett, 1968, 1976; Macrorie, 1970; Elbow, 1973), a base which sees writing as a creative process of immense perceptual, linguistic, and cognitive complexity in which meanings are made through the active and continued involvement of the writer with the unfolding text. Proponents have "chosen to cease looking at the text autonomously, as text alone. Instead . . . [they] view the piece of writing within a total rhetorical context which includes writer, audience, and world as well" (Freedman and Pringle, 1980, p. 177).

Iowa's independent writing project (IWP) began in the summer of 1978; in the ten years since its conception, over three thousand teachers from all grade levels and content areas have studied in the Project's three-week summer institutes. This summer another twelve hundred will do so. In the mornings, the participants read from the current research and theory on writing and writing instruction. In the afternoons, they write.

Do writing project participants adopt the beliefs on which these projects are based? Do they make a difference in their classroom practices? James Moffett must think so. He refers to this movement as "The most positive development in English education . . . during the whole period since World War II" It has, he says, "accomplished far more good than all of the U. S. Office of Education Project English curriculum

centers of the '60s put together" (Moffett, 1981, p. 81). Others talk in general terms about how writing project participants "have significantly improved their classroom teaching skills . . ." (Daniels and Zemelman, 1985, p. 4). In addition, more specific "success" stories are told. One informal study of a high school English teacher claims that "Although, after ten years of teaching, she was at the same school, teaching the same courses, she was not the same teacher she had been before . . . [the project]." (Bunch, 1980a, p. 2).

Informal stories, then, tell us that these programs can and do change teachers' beliefs and practices. What has been missing was a study that moved close to teachers and examined the fit between the meaning systems promoted by the projects and those held by project participants.

This study does that by using survey, interview, and case study methodologies to examine the ways in which participation in the Iowa Writing Project has had a continuing influence on those secondary English language arts teachers who studied in the Iowa Writing Project in 1982 and 1985. This research is messy, but provocative, and still very much in process.

Across the board all teachers report changes in their beliefs about writing and the teaching of writing. It's a change process that begins during the three-week workshop. Marilyn, a woman who has taught in rural Iowa for twenty years describes it for us (I/MH):

Maybe the first week you're just trying to climb over the wall that's in your head. We've been trained one way. We've had such tremendous amount of experience in one way of teaching composition and when suddenly somebody says "Take a look at that wall that you've been using in defense of your writing strategies up until now." We don't want to bring that wall down. You don't want to say "I haven't been doing it the way I should have been doing it." So the first week

you're just trying to get over the wall. By the second week you're in a deep ocean and my God there are so many wonderful things out there in the ocean and you can't catch the fish. . . . You truly search your entire professional training, your experience. You're going home and you can't rest with it. You are wondering, and you keep reading, and the more you read the more you realize you've got to shake loose from your past. I think it's a very difficult transition. Now by the third week of the project it seems like that conversion has happened. Where all at once you begin to see a new shape, a new vision. You begin to get more concrete ideas of how you could do it. But that uncertainty continues . . . for . . . at least one year and . . . for some people three or four years. . . . And when we came out of that writing project it was like a whole new religion, a new philosophy, a new belief system, a new way of relating to one another. We became a community, just like a religious group becomes a community. We're working together for the same common destiny or fate--hoping for the same salvation, that we could survive as teachers. And, just like a religion gives you a whole different philosophy or attitude, I think the writing project gave you a vision that we didn't have until then, and turned, what had too often been drudgery, into almost a joy, at least a joyful way of looking at it.

Many of the teachers I interviewed use the metaphor of religious conversion. They talk about a "new spirit," wanting to be "crusaders," and having a "religious revival."

This change process is often perceived by the teachers as being dramatic and even traumatic. One teacher talks about her "total turnaround." Another speaks of going home each day of the workshop and crying "because, " she says, "I had to re-evaluate what I had done and make that comparison." Making that comparison--thinking about old practices--often involves some remorse. "Oh my god. It was just so shameful," one teacher claims. Several speak of wanting to apologize to former students. Rod, who teaches at an urban school, says, "I cringe when I think back on some of the things I used to do."

Those past practices usually sprang from a belief or assumption that writing is a product to be evaluated; that it arises from a conscious linear process, is a silent and solitary activity, is given to definite

forms, and is best taught in steps: words, sentences, paragraphs, extended discourse. Correctness is paramount. For Rod this meant ". . . picking out all the spelling errors, mechanical things, taking papers apart." Tony says, "I'd always give assignments, and I'd always give the length of the paper, and I'd always check to make sure we had a topic sentence and supporting details." In Kathy's junior high school classroom it meant "drill and skill--worksheet kinds of things." Only her "upper level" students were ever asked to write.

That change process away from these kinds of assumptions--for most teachers--continues after the project--as Marilyn indicated. These teachers' beliefs evolve, and as they report those beliefs, they are consonant with those that are central to the IWP. Barb and John provide us with typical examples of those stated beliefs. Barb says (II/BR):

You need to write for yourself first. You need to write about what's important to you. You need to write that for yourself rather than worrying about what anybody else might want. You need to communicate with yourself first to get that initial writing out of yourself. And from there consider an audience as you start to share.

And John says (II/JP):

I think it's to recognize that a variety of intellectual processes need to occur for a final product to occur. It is an attitudinal thing and it is saying "You are capable of generating ideas. You are capable of reworking them to the point where they can be shared." Virtually everyone can. It's a very inclusive kind of thing.

It is not until implementation--teachers' efforts at playing out those beliefs--that we begin to see much dissonance. Teachers are often aware of such dissonance, as is Lori, a six-year veteran of teaching (III/LL):

Well, realistically, . . . the workshop idea--the theory I have in my head is not being practiced. Especially with my seventh graders. Conferencing and working very individually with my kids is not being done to the extent I would like to. It's more on a volunteer basis. I do have some kids coming to me and wanting me to talk about their

paper . . . , but I don't do that with all the kids. Part of that is because when I start working up here with these guys I got the jokers back there who are off in another world. So what I'm doing is monitoring the whole group--keeping everybody on task. . . . Probably one of the most difficult things with me is dealing with the grading--surrendering the objective tasks of grading--the quizzes and the things where it's easy to say this is the wrong answer. . . . I want to be able to say, "Well, you missed 5 so that's this grade." You can't do that with their writing.

It is in part Lori's knowledge of her students that creates some dissonance for her. It is also probably Lori's need or felt responsibility for maintaining an orderly room where all students are overtly on task that keeps her from practicing what she claims to believe. Mike, a teacher fully committed to the writing project and its approach--he has taken all three levels of the project and recently repeated level one, and he teaches the workshop himself--explains this problem: "I think probably the classroom environment, the noise level, is a hard control to relinquish. Because I know there are several teachers, and I tend to be one, that associate a high noise level with a lack of productivity...." Sharon, his colleague, is typically more blunt: "We like to be in control," she says. "We're bossy people. We wouldn't be teachers if we weren't."

Lori has raised another issue that is an obstacle to many teachers in their attempts at moving from theory to practice: evaluation. Schools expect teachers to be evaluators. If she has to play that role, Lori would rather do it objectively, but she doesn't believe it's possible. In an attempt at solving her dilemma with both control and evaluation, Lori pulls out her grammar book. "And I wasn't going to do that," she says. It makes her uncomfortable--puts her in conflict with her stated beliefs--but she sees this as the lesser evil.

Sharon's problem with evaluation is different. She says (III/SP):

Although I hated grading papers in the old days when we circled every error and all that, I still find it very hard not to do it. Even after five years I still find it hard not to do it. I just think it's ingrained in the English teacher's bloodstream. . . .

Although Sharon believes that circling errors is counterproductive to the development of her students as writers, she finds it hard to "kick the habit." Sometimes she gives in to the urge. Other times she attempts to satisfy it with other behaviors, like focussing on only one kind of error or writing a suggestion at the end of the paper such as: "Maybe you ought to look at sentence structure; you write a lot of run-on sentences." While it eases her need, she worries about its effect and acknowledges that "No one has ever come to me and said, 'Help me not write run-on sentences anymore.'"

Teachers identify a variety of factors which they perceive as impediments to teaching as they believe they should. They talk about curricular restraints, a lack of support services, too little room, outsider expectations that good grammar instruction results in good writing, schools and communities that value standardized test scores, their own fears, and an awareness that their students may encounter future high school and college instructors who will expect certain skills and forms to have been mastered. These teachers believe that something quite different than their own notions of sound practice is expected of them. Lynne illustrates that with a tale from her school (III/LG):

We had one administrator [who] was supportive of what we were doing but didn't understand it, and the other teacher came up to me and she said, "I've just had my first evaluation." I said, "How'd it go?" "Do you know what she said to me? She watched me do a whole writing workshop and it went marvelous. I was conferencing; the kids were working. And after the class she said, 'Can I come back when you're teaching?' I thought that was what I was doing."

Such expectations from administrators, parents, and other teachers often push these teachers into practices that they no longer value. Generally these teachers are confronted with choices and are aware of the dissonance that results in their electing to do other than that in which they believe. But this is not always the case. Barb is an example. She is the teacher I mentioned earlier who spoke of the "total turnaround" that resulted from her participation in the IWP. Barb has taken all three levels of the wp, and she is hungry for more. On the first page of the hand-cut, under BELIEFS, we read what it is that Barb believes now about writing and the teaching of writing.

Barb is committed to what she believes, and, for the most part, her classroom practices reflect those beliefs. Three years ago the school reading committee--on which Barb serves, along with her principal, the superintendent, and several other teachers--turned its attention to what they saw as the "horrendous study habits" of the older students. The committee decided that a study skills unit needed to be incorporated into the ninth grade English course. Barb, as the freshmen instructor, instituted this unit as a semester-long component of her two-semester course. Wanting to get it out of the way so that she could move into a more language-based class, Barb frontloaded the unit, but kept each Friday aside for writing workshop, seeing that as too important to delay until second semester. On each Friday Barb does what she really loves: teaches writing. They freewrite, prewrite, rewrite, and respond--and Barb carefully affirms their efforts. She has made--in her own mind--a clear distinction between what happens in study skills and what happens in writing workshop. Her students don't seem to be making that same

distinction. I asked Sonya, whom Barb describes as intelligent and articulate, what she thought Barb thought was most important for Sonya to learn about writing--this after four months of class. Sonya responded, "Be clear and get down to the main idea." When asked to elucidate, she also included "taking notes" and "being organized." Her evidence? "She's always talking about study skills and how we should be organized."

Here Barb is a willing but unknowing accomplice in her own dissonance. The constraints of schooling--a perceived need to teach study skills, a need based on the subjective reality within which Barb believes herself to be working--causes her to hold two seemingly contradictory beliefs.

Lortie (1975) refers to change as a subjective process, an experience that needs to be responded to and assimilated by an individual. In examining this process, then, it is also necessary to consider the subjective realities of the teachers involved in that process. Sarason (1982), Jackson (1968), Smith and Geoffrey (1968), Lortie (1975), House and Lapan (1978), Huberman (1980), Lightfoot (1983), and Lieberman and Miller (1984) have all described the subjective realities of teachers. They tell us that teachers are uncertain about how to influence students, or even if they are influencing students. They have to deal with a group of students and teach them something, while, at the same time, dealing with each child as an individual--and do all this in relative isolation from other adults. As a result they develop--through practical trial and error--highly personalized styles with few opportunities for reflection or thinking through a rationale. Teachers always feel short of time; they must deal with constant interruptions, both from within and from outside the classroom. The schedule is highly routinized. Goals are unclear. Given

such a world, many proposals for change do not make sense to teachers. As House explains it:

The personal costs of trying new innovations are often high, . . . and seldom is there any indication that innovations are worth the investment. Innovations are acts of faith. They require that one believe that they will ultimately bear fruit and be worth the personal investment, often without the hope of an immediate return (House, 1974, p. 73).

Swanson-Owens, in a recently published case study of implementing writing across the curriculum reminds us "that teachers are not passive transmitters of knowledge but rather active and adaptive agents who filter curricular innovations . . . through complex meaning systems" (1986, p. 71).

In addition to the subjective nature of change, Fullan speaks of the "objective reality" (p. 29) of educational change. He says there are at least three dimensions at stake in implementing any new program or policy: materials, approaches, and beliefs. Any individual may implement none, one, two, or all three dimensions (Fullan, 1982, p. 30).

The work of Bussis, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976) into the nature and import of teachers' understandings and constructs supports Fullan's assertions. These three found that it is possible to change on the surface by endorsing certain goals, using certain materials, and imitating certain behaviors without really understanding the principles and rationale behind these goals, materials, and behaviors. It is also possible for teachers to value the philosophy behind a change without understanding its implications for implementation. Change is multidimensional; it involves a dynamic interrelationship among Fullan's three components. He has more to say about them:

The innovation as a set of materials and resources is the most visible aspect of change, and the easiest to employ Change in teaching approach or style in using new materials presents greater difficulty Changes in beliefs are yet more difficult: . . . beliefs are often not explicit, discussed, or understood, but rather are buried at the level of unstated assumptions. And the development of a clear belief system is essential, because it provides a set of criteria for overall planning and a screen for sifting valuable from not-so-valuable learning opportunities that inevitably arise during instruction (Fullan, 1982, pp. 34-35).

Innovations, then, are acts of faith--and it would seem that these teachers can more easily hold such faith because of the success they feel as students in the writing project, particularly in the afternoon writing workshops. As Rod says, "When you go through the project you get this sense of community and you see this growth in your peers and it's not hard to imagine what the growth would be like in kids. And that's going to help you go back to the classroom more confidently and interject some of those same approaches." The workshops give the teachers a new approach and direct experience that such an approach can work. This facilitates surface change--change at the materials and approaches levels. New rituals develop--green ink, journals, writing folders, conferences, responsive marginal and end comments--along with a new vocabulary--"process," "polish," "ownership," "draft"--all of which identify one as a member of a new community--an IWP process community. Teachers are often tired, busy, and lonely people; they hunger for such membership.

At the same time, those aspects of teachers' contexts that contribute to their fatigue and isolation may also guarantee that any change remains at the surface level. Old assumptions may simply be replaced or joined by new and perhaps contradictory ones; a lack of time for reflection and a

separation from the new community keep these assumptions buried and unexamined. Ultimately this can be crippling, as Rod explains (IV/RC):

I don't think I had a philosophy after . . . [the writing project]. I had an approach . . . , a different approach to the teaching of writing. I only had a week by the time the project ended and school started. I think if I had three or four weeks I might have reflected a little bit more and developed more of a philosophical basis for what I was going to do. As it was I simply had an approach. It really didn't go any further than the kids should write what they want and that writing should be accepted and respected for what it is. . . . [Form and mechanics] should be left until the end. I just had those basics. It didn't allow me to reflect on what I was doing. It didn't give me anything to measure what I was doing against an ideal. . . . I couldn't stop and say, "Gee, I'm meeting my philosophical objectives here." I was sort of floating out there, and when that ran its course, I didn't know where to go. I didn't have a basis to build on. I had an approach, and when that approach had run its course, I was done.

It wasn't until two years later that Rod began to solve his problem (IV/RC):

. . . [Now] I don't try to recreate the project experience in my classroom like I did initially. I try to make it a more subtle part of my overall approach to teaching. . . . I've learned to use it a little bit better, instead of just doing it.

Many teachers begin their post-wp practice by "doing" the writing project in their classrooms--attempting to recreate the experience. Rod says that while that was "successful in many ways," it was also "frustrating" and "very tiring." "Maybe I was a little bit too idealistic," he admits. His move from merely "adopting" the model to "adapting" it--integrating it into his classroom--has allowed him to rest more comfortably. The passage of time has allowed him to develop his new approach into a philosophy--one that provides a standard for decision-making.

While teachers' stated beliefs clearly--and almost uniformly--change during and after participation in a writing project workshop, the results

are more ambiguous when we speak of teachers' practices. To better understand this ambiguity, we need more studies that get close to teachers and their contexts, studies that seek to identify their insider perspectives and the ways in which these perspectives and their contexts filter the writing project curricula. There may well be a "natural" dissonance between theories and schools that assures that one of the two will have to change--that all post-wp teachers will have to follow Rod in moving from adoption to adaptation and integration.

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David E. Wilson
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I. CHANGE

MH: Maybe the first week you're just trying to climb over the wall that's in your head. We've been trained one way. We've had such tremendous amount of experience in one way of teaching composition and when suddenly somebody says "Take a look at that wall that you've been using in defense of your writing strategies up until now." We don't want to bring that wall down. You don't want to say "I haven't been doing it the way I should have been doing it." So the first week you're just trying to get over the wall. By the second week you're in a deep ocean and my God there are so many wonderful things out there in the ocean and you can't catch the fish. . . . You truly search your entire professional training, your experience. You're going home and you can't rest with it. You are wondering, and you keep reading, and the more you read the more you realize you've got to shake loose from your past. I think it's a very difficult transition. Now by the third week of the project it seems like that conversion has happened. Where all at once you begin to see a new shape, a new vision. You begin to get more concrete ideas of how you could do it. But that uncertainty continues . . . for . . . at least one year and . . . for some people three or four years. . . . And when we came out of that writing project it was like a whole new religion, a new philosophy, a new belief system, a new way of relating to one another. We became a community, just like a religious group becomes a community. We're working together for the same common destiny or fate--hoping for the same salvation, that we could survive as teachers. And, just like a religion gives you a whole different philosophy or attitude, I think the writing project gave you a vision that we didn't have until then, and turned, what had too often been drudgery, into almost a joy, at least a joyful way of looking at it.

II. BELIEFS

BR: You need to write for yourself first. You need to write about what's important to you. You need to write that for yourself rather than worrying about what anybody else might want. You need to communicate with yourself first to get that initial writing out of yourself. And from there consider an audience as you start to share.

JP: I think it's to recognize that a variety of intellectual processes need to occur for a final product to occur. It is an attitudinal thing and it is saying "You are capable of generating ideas. You are capable of reworking them to the point where they can be shared." Virtually everyone can. It's a very inclusive kind of thing.

III. DISSONANCE

LL: Well, realistically, . . . the workshop idea--the theory I have in my head is not being practiced. Especially with my seventh graders. Conferencing and working very individually with my kids is not being done to the extent I would like to. It's more on a volunteer basis. I do have some kids coming to me and wanting me to talk about their paper . . . , but I don't do that with all the kids. Part of that is because when I start working up here with these guys I got the jokers back there who are off in another world. So what I'm doing is monitoring the whole group--keeping everybody on task. . . . Probably one of the most difficult things with me is dealing with the grading--surrendering the objective tasks of grading--the quizzes and the things where it's easy to say this is the wrong answer. . . . I want to be able to say, "Well, you missed 5 so that's this grade." You can't do that with their writing.

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LG: We had one administrator [who] was supportive of what we were doing but didn't understand it and the other teacher came up to me and she said, "I've just had my first evaluation." I said "How'd it go?" "Do you know what she said to me? She watched me do a whole writing workshop and it went marvelous. I was conferencing; the kids were working. And after the class she said, 'Can I come back when you're teaching?' I thought that was what I was doing."

IV. INTEGRATION

RC: I don't think I had a philosophy after . . . [the writing project]. I had an approach . . . , a different approach to the teaching of writing. I only had a week by the time the project ended and school started. I think if I had three or four weeks I might have reflected a little bit more and developed more of a philosophical basis for what I was going to do. As it was I simply had an approach. It really didn't go any further than the kids should write what they want and that writing should be accepted and respected for what it is. . . . [Form and mechanics] should be left until the end. I just had those basics. It didn't allow me to reflect on what I was doing. It didn't give me anything to measure what I was doing against an ideal. . . . I couldn't stop and say, "Gee, I'm meeting my philosophical objectives here." I was sort of floating out there, and when that ran its course, I didn't know where to go. I didn't have a basis to build on. I had an approach, and when that approach had run its course, I was done.

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